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A Defense of Plato to a Narcissist Society

Jessie Whalen
Essay
Second Place

The concept of the individual in society and his education as such is a sacred theme to most Western thinkers. To Plato, the concept is virtually nonexistent. He believes that the state as a whole is more important than the individual. His concept arises from the Greek institution of the polis and so might prove to be invalid in our age of isolation in the city mob. But wouldn't it be interesting to investigate the possibility that Plato's theories are applicable to us? What if the formation of a perfect state is the proper end of education instead of the formation of a fully actualized individual?

In the wild, a rabbit hops out of its hole to search for food and a hound kills the rabbit and eats it. The individual rabbit has no rights, nor does the hound. They both follow urges that might be called "Law" in the society of nature. In our world, human animals create a framework called "Law" to insure safe existence in human society. This institution is subject to corruption because individuals seek to further their own prosperity through the institution. Therefore, individuals under the power of the institution must have certain rights to counter the corrupt state. The problem with this system is in knowing just how far individual rights may interfere with the functions of the state. Following the lead of Plato, it seems that this problem arises from improper education.

Plato tells us in the **Republic** that children must be educated not as

individuals but as important components in the society that makes up the state. Only a few may be guardians, just as only a few may be shoemakers. The guardians must not be taught that they are superior to the shoemakers as individuals, but only that they have a talent in that occupation just as shoemakers are talented at shoemaking. Every group is educated so that they are the best at what they do and nothing else, and are taught to believe that their group plays an important role in the function of the state. Ideally, there is no jealousy or class struggle.

■

***It is a beautiful concept—
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■

Western thought today would indicate that this is impossible—that there will always be discontent in a state where there is no opportunity for individual expansion. Maybe so, but (at the risk of sounding socialist) what if Plato's extensive censorship could be applied, and greed could be abolished, and one man could have superiority over another only in the proper organization of the state, and everyone agreed that this was right? That is what Plato projects to me and what he sees happening as a result of proper education. It is a beautiful concept—self-sacrifice for the growth of something better than and far outreaching ourselves.

Unfortunately, I am one of those who thrives on individual accomplishments and the praise I receive for them. But to recognize the tendency in man to structure institutions by which to govern himself seems to contradict that selfish urge to isolate and superiorize oneself above society.

Wouldn't it be funny if . . . when we die and the Milky Way joins the rush of galaxies back toward the Center to collide, and our essence mingled with that of the Creator and asked, "Why did I exist?" the Creator replied, "So that you might have sacrificed your inherent urge to be God and given yourself to a Perfect State in worship of Me."□